

BIO OF DONALD GORDON FRASER

A Canadian from rural Northern Ontario, Donald Fraser spent his working years in Toronto and later years in rural eastern Ontario. He was a professional artist trained at the Ontario College of Art, who by day painted scenic backdrops at the CBC TV Studios and by night taught Life-drawing at Northern Secondary School.

As wayfarer drawn to the back alleys of River Street and Regent Park and the gloomy pubs of mid-century Toronto (the Paramount, the Waverly) he captured the decrepit faces of the habitués in his walnut-husk ink drawings. But he was also an outdoorsman who plied Toronto's Don Valley with fellow painters Jo Manning, Al Colton and Albert Chiarandini; then roamed further afield to the Georgian Bay inlets and the Laurentian Shield with friends Ross Robertshaw, Bill Hopkinson & Ron Leonard, stopping to paint as they went. His later years were spent with his wife Catherine in a farmhouse near Madoc, Ontario, amid the rocks and swamps and old stumps, which he loved.

Donald was born on a farm in Charlton, near Kirkland Lake in 1921, the son of Dora Watson and prospector Roderick Dhu Fraser. In 1925 Fraser's parents moved the growing family by train to a small farmstead in the warmth of Hudson, Florida to seek relief from the bitter winters of Northern Ontario. By the time Don was 12 years old the bleak economic conditions brought on by the Stock Market Crash of 1929 forced the family back to Canada, to the Muskoka District. He spent his high school years in Bracebridge. In 1940, when Don won a tuition scholarship to study at the Ontario College of Art, the whole family moved to a 13-room house at 370 Huron Street in Toronto, where his mother could take in roomers to augment the family income.

At the OCA Don Fraser excelled, winning tuition scholarships every year. This enabled him to study under Franklin Carmichael, John Alfsen, Yvonne Mckague-Housser, George Pepper, Rowley Murphy, Manly MacDonald, and Eric Aldwinkle. He graduated in 1944 with the Governor General's Award of Excellence.

Donald Fraser's career as an artist was eclectic. He worked as Drawing and Painting Instructor and as Scenic Artist. He did free-lance commercial display work, accepted portrait commissions and in his early working years, found employment painting floral designs on metal trays and wastepaper baskets for a company called Artline. And he was a constant drawer and painter of all images that caught his eye, indoors and out.

Following his graduation from the Ontario College of Art (now known as Ontario College of Art and Design), Donald joined the faculty, teaching there for five years and in addition he was on the faculty of the Artists' Workshop. He then graduated from the Ontario College of Education and had a two-year stint as a full-time high school art teacher in Toronto. In 1955 he became an employed as a Scenic Artist by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation on Sumach Street in Toronto, where he was adept at painting large and loose with the long-handled brushes used to paint on the backdrop flats for televised plays. As well, many of the sketches he left behind record the faces of fellow CBC workers on their lunch breaks. Throughout the 30 years he worked at CBC, Donald also taught the popular night-classes in Life-Drawing at Northern Secondary School, the Portraiture classes at Danforth Technical School and during his summer vacations he taught Landscape painting at the Schneider School of Fine Art in Actinolite Ontario.

Fraser's passion was painting. From his childhood years he was absorbed by a compulsion to draw and paint in whatever medium was at hand. His subjects ranged from animals to Toronto backstreets, elderly streetcar passengers and the faces of native Canadians to the rocky bush and crumbling barns of the Laurentian Shield. Although he first exhibited in 1944 with the Ontario Society of Artists, his overwhelming focus was to draw and paint. He relinquished few pieces until he moved to Madoc after retirement from the CBC. It was only then that he was persuaded to give serious attention to selling, when Studio 737 Art Gallery began showing his work.

In the early 90's, Thierry Lefrançois, a historian and curator of The Museum of the New World in the city of La Rochelle, France, happened to see one of Fraser's large oils, *Cranberry Marsh*. Fraser's depictions of the exposed granite ridges and forlorn beaver marshes reminded him of the 17th century French explorers' accounts of the rugged terrain they had traversed in Canada. As a result, Mr. Lefrançois arranged a four month exhibition of 70 of Fraser's paintings at La Musée du Nouveau Monde in 1995.

Donald Gordon Fraser died at age 82 in 2003 in Madoc after a lifelong struggle with the effects of juvenile diabetes. Throughout his life, Don was his own person, uninterested in following the trends of the art world, but deeply engaged by the human dynamic of daily life in the city and by the drama of the natural world.